Evaluating the Impact of Recreational Cannabis Legalization in Canada (2018–2024)
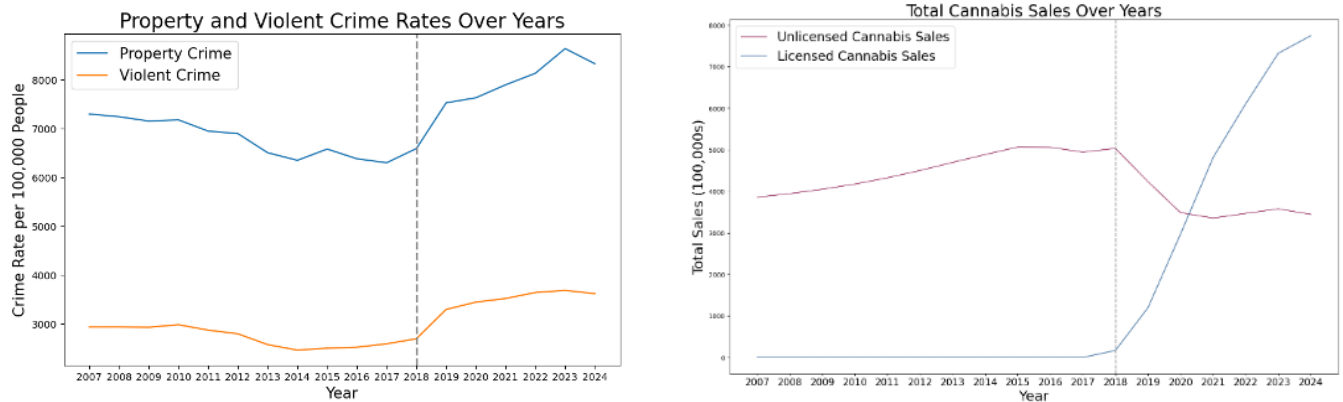

Figure 1: Property and violent crime rates per 100,000 people from 2007 to 2024, showing both rates increased following legalization in 2018 rather than declining.

Figure 2 : Total licensed and unlicensed cannabis sales over time, showing licensed sales surpassed unlicensed sales by around 2021 though the illegal market remains active.
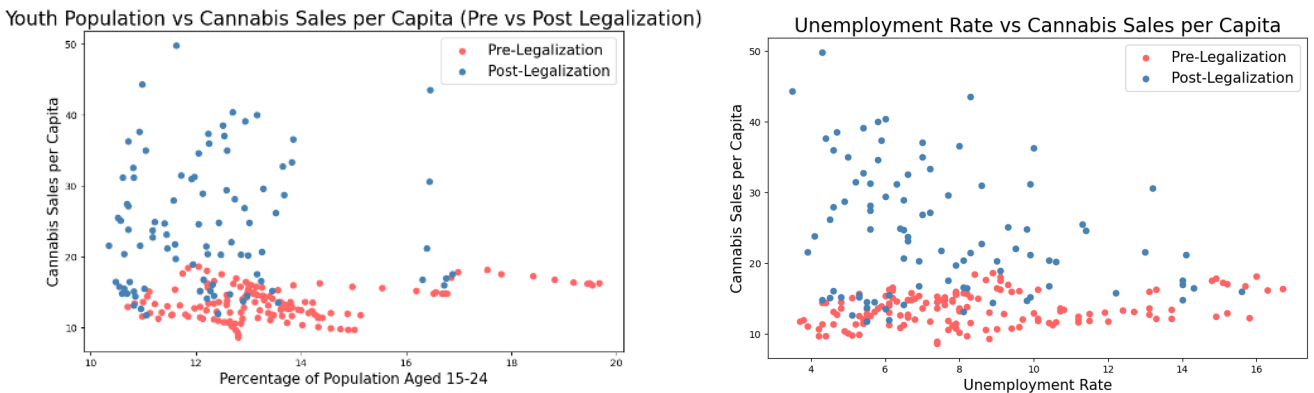

Figure 3: Youth population share versus cannabis sales per capita pre and post legalization, showing sales increased broadly after 2018 regardless of how many young people live in a province.
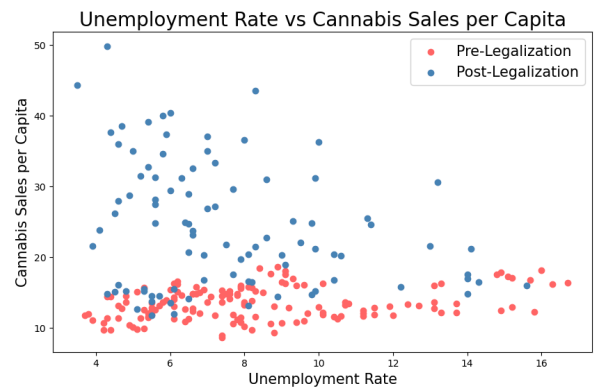
Figure 4: Unemployment rate versus cannabis sales per capita pre and post legalization, showing post-legalization sales rose across all unemployment levels with no clear relationship between the two.
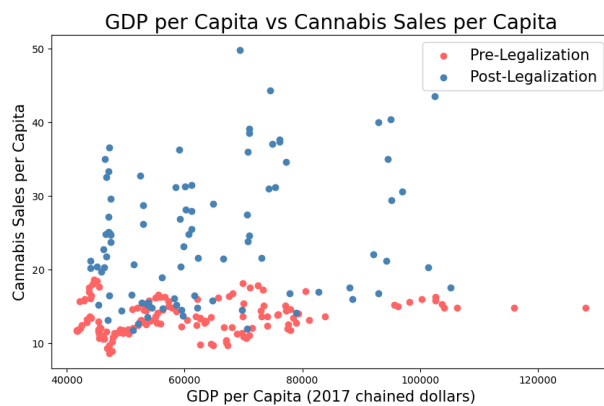

Figure 5: GDP per capita versus cannabis sales per capita pre and post legalization, showing higher income provinces do not necessarily consume more cannabis and demand appears income-insensitive.

When Canada legalized recreational cannabis in 2018, the stated goals were to better protect youth, eliminate the illegal market, and reduce profits flowing to criminal organizations. As seen in Figure 1, crime rates rose after legalization rather than falling, which suggests that policymakers should concentrate enforcement efforts directly on the illegal distribution networks that are still operating rather than assuming the legal market will handle the problem on its own. As seen in Figure 2, while licensed sales have clearly overtaken unlicensed sales by around 2021, the illegal market continues to operate at a meaningful level, reinforcing the need for continued targeted enforcement. As seen in Figure 3, cannabis sales per capita spread out dramatically after legalization regardless of how large the youth population was in a given province, and as seen in Figure 4, the same pattern holds across unemployment levels, with post-legalization sales rising sharply even in provinces with very low unemployment, suggesting that neither youth population share nor economic hardship are meaningful drivers of cannabis consumption and that enforcement and policy should not be narrowly targeted at economically distressed or youth-heavy regions. As seen in Figure 5, some of the highest post-legalization sales actually appear in lower GDP provinces rather than wealthier ones, further suggesting that cannabis demand does not follow income levels, and because of this the government should evaluate pricing and retail access as the more likely factors influencing where and how much cannabis is being purchased. Finally, because none of the current data directly measures whether youth consumption has actually changed since 2018, future data collection should prioritize direct youth cannabis usage rates at the provincial level, since without that information one of the central goals of legalization cannot be properly evaluated.